

J.C. Blair Company Complex
Corner of Sixth and Penn streets
Huntingdon
Huntingdon County
Pennsylvania

HAER No. PA-241

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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Engineering Record
National Park Service
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HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

J.C. BLAIR COMPANY COMPLEX

HAER No. PA-241

Location: Between Sixth and Seventh streets and Penn and Allegheny streets, Huntingdon, Huntingdon County, Pennsylvania

Date of Construction: 1885-1930

Builder: J.C. Blair

Present Owner: Leon Hopkins (Huntingdon Electric Motor Company)

Present Use: Warehousing and retail business

Significance: In the mid-1870s, J.C. Blair experimented with padded paper tablets and began the commercial manufacture of his invention in 1878. The paper tablet became the foundation of the mammoth J.C. Blair Company that he developed and the complex of buildings he erected.

Project Information: In February 1987, the Historic American Engineering Record (HAER) and the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) began a multi-year historical and architectural documentation project in southwestern Pennsylvania. Carried out in conjunction with America's Industrial Heritage Project (AIHP), HAER undertook a comprehensive inventory of Blair and Cambria counties as the first step in identifying the region's surviving historic engineering works and industrial resources.

The results of this project have been published in Huntingdon County, Pennsylvania: An Inventory of Historic Engineering and Industrial Sites, (1991), by Nancy Shedd, Sarah Heald, editor and published by HABS/HAER for the National Park Service.

Compiler: Nancy Shedd and Ken Heineman, Historians
Gray Fitzsimons and Kenneth Rose, Editors

History:

DESCRIPTION: The J. C. Blair Company complex, in which paper tablets were manufactured, includes five buildings designated in company records and on Sanborn maps as "A" (corner of Sixth and Penn), "B" (corner of Sixth and Allegheny), "C" (west of and attached to B), "E" (fronting on Penn, west of A), "H" (attached to south side of E). Building A (1889): the principal Blair Building measures 100' x 87', with a seven-story front and a full basement story exposed at the rear. The brick bearing walls feature colored mortar and decorative terra cotta trim, on a foundation of rock-faced brownstone blocks. The interior is trimmed in quartered oak with coffered ceilings, heavy timber posts and beams, and wood floors. It retains its original freight and passenger elevators, as well as the vault, early wiring, and fixtures. Building B (1885): a 90' x 50', four-story brick building with a cut-stone foundation has tall paired windows headed by triple-light transoms with slightly arched tops. Building C (1901): a 72' x 50' addition to B is virtually identical in construction and detail. Building E (1930): a 250' x 87', four-story brick and steel-frame factory has a concrete foundation, large steel-framed windows, concrete floors in the first and second stories, and heavy wood floors in the third and fourth stories. Building H (1930): a 75' x 65', four-story brick warehouse has a steel frame, concrete foundation, and large square steel-framed windows. Buildings A, B, and C are now used only for storage; B and C are particularly deteriorated. Buildings E and H are used by the Huntingdon Electric Motor Company.

HISTORY: The company began as a small bookstore purchased by J. C. Blair in 1867, to which he added a hand press for job printing. In the mid-1870s, he experimented with padded paper tablets and began the commercial manufacture of his invention in 1878. The paper tablet, which the Manufacturing Stationers Association credited Blair with inventing, became the foundation of the mammoth J. C. Blair Company that he developed and the complex of buildings he erected. In 1881 Blair converted a former church into a manufacturing plant, and in 1885 erected building B to house his rapidly expanding business, whose products were then being sold nationally and marketed internationally. In 1889 construction began on a new building designed by F. L. Olds, then the supervising architect at the Pennsylvania State College. Olds adapted the design of the Blair Building from H. H. Richardson's widely acclaimed Marshall Field warehouse in Chicago, commissioned just four years earlier, in 1885. When erected, the seven-story Blair Building was said to be the tallest structure between Pittsburgh and Philadelphia.

An industrialist-philanthropist, Blair offered profit-sharing to his employees, and he paid to pave town streets, and built tennis courts, playing fields, and a park in Huntingdon. In addition, he had colored flags, that functioned as a weather-prediction system familiar to residents, hoisted atop his tallest building. When he died at the age of 49 in 1897, he left shares in the company to employees who carried on the business.

In 1949 the company became a division of Western Tablet and Stationery Corporation, which eventually merged with Mead Corporation. Operations were moved in 1965 to a modern plant in

Alexandria, and this complex of buildings was donated to Juniata College. Juniata College owned the buildings for less than ten years, after which Leon Hopkins acquired the property. Since then, portions of the buildings have been rented to various tenants for warehousing and retail business. Hopkins' business, Huntingdon Electric Motor Company, occupies two floors of building E and portions of buildings A and H. He has demolished part of the former power plant and smokestack.

Sources:

- Hopkins, Leon, Owner of the J. C. Blair complex. Interview by author, 29 July 1988.
- J. C. Blair Company. Records and Photographs. Huntingdon County Historical Society, Huntingdon, Pennsylvania. (This collection is from the 1965 donation of business papers and glass negatives. Leon Hopkins has preserved the plans and architect's drawings of the buildings found when he took possession.)
- Sanborn Map Company. Huntingdon, Pennsylvania. New York: Sanborn Map Company, 1884, 1891, 1896, 1901, 1926 (updated to 1949).
- Shedd, Nancy S. An Architectural Study of the Ancient Borough of Huntingdon. Huntingdon: John S. Rodgers Company, 1976.
- Shedd, Nancy S., and Harshbarger, Jean P. Second Century: A Huntingdon County Bicentennial Album. Huntingdon: Huntingdon County Historical Society, 1987.
- Van Rensselaer, Mariana Griswold. Henry Hobson Richardson and His Works. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1969.